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ARTICLE

What Is a Desiring Man?

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates Foucault's account of desiring man by drawing upon *History of Sexuality* vol. 4, *Confessions of the Flesh*. In order to do so, the article focuses on Foucault's diagnosis of the Christian elaboration of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" that closes *Confessions of the Flesh*. As the article shows, "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" inspires Foucault's account of desiring man. However, Foucault's diagnosis of the Christian elaboration of "the analytic of concupiscence" proves to be debatable as it relies on a problematic interplay between Cassian's and Saint Augustine's account of concupiscence. The article exposes the problems that such interplay supposes by addressing the contrast between Cassian's and Augustine's perspective on both concupiscence and the human condition. Despite this problematic aspect of Foucault's investigation of Christianity, the article argues that the publication of *Confessions of the Flesh* is central to understanding Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. By providing new elements of analysis, the book reopens Foucault's genealogical diagnosis of the formation of the medical account of sexuality and allows us to problematise new avenues for developing Foucault's investigation in depth.

Keywords: Confessions of the Flesh, desiring man, History of Sexuality, Christianity, Saint Augustine, John Cassian.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of "desiring man" lies at the heart of Foucault's project *History of Sexuality*. While it does not appear in *History of Sexuality* vol. 1 – even if Foucault had already employed it previously¹ – the syntagma "desiring man" acquires all its significance in the "modifications" introduced by *History of Sexuality* vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure*. The relevance that this text assigns to the aforementioned syntagma is twofold. First, the historical formation of the "principle of desiring man" is conceived as a crucial milestone in the genealogy of the modern medical account of sexuality.² Secondly, the principle of desiring man

¹ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation* (1988), 20.

² Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality* vol. 2. *The Use of Pleasure* (1990), 5.

constitutes a notion that combines two of the main domains of analysis addressed by Foucault's inquiry into sexuality: truth and subjectivity. The genealogy of the desiring man aims "to analyse the practices by which individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognise, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire, bringing into play between themselves and themselves a certain relationship that allows them to discover, in desire, the truth of their being".³

Drawing upon Foucault's *History of Sexuality* vol. 4, *Confessions of the Flesh*, this article aims to analyse the conceptual scope of the "principle of desiring man" and to investigate the role that it plays in Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Dedicated to analysing the sexual ethics elaborated by the Church Fathers, *Confessions of the Flesh* plays a major role in Foucault's reflection on the "principle of desiring man". This is because Foucault tends to assign to early Christianity the formation of this principle. However, this diagnosis seems to be problematic and shows the extent to which Foucault's investigation of desiring man was left unfinished as a consequence of Foucault's early death. The problems entailed by Foucault's historical diagnosis of the shaping of the "principle of desiring man" seems to be particularly related to the interplay between Cassian's ascetic techniques of truth-telling and Augustine's account of concupiscence.⁴ Such interplay is the basis on which Foucault's diagnosis of the Christian development of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" relies and which constitutes the embryonic definition of what will be defined later as the "principle of desiring man". The main problem of the interplay between Cassian and Augustine proposed by Foucault is that it does not take into account Cassian's and St. Augustine's different perspectives on both concupiscence and the human condition. In fact, the monk and the bishop of Hippo had quite diverse approaches to these two topics. Despite these difficulties, Foucault's reflections on the historical shaping of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" contained in *Confessions of the Flesh* have a crucial value. The *History of Sexuality* vol. 4 not only allows us to grasp the status of Foucault's research on *History of Sexuality* better by making available new material, in particular about St. Augustine, but also because the book opens new avenues for developing Foucault's research in depth.

The first section focuses on the modifications introduced by the notion of desiring man to the genealogical diagnosis of *History of Sexuality* vol. 1, which already conceived Christianity as the historical focal point of the formation of the modern medical account of sexuality. The second section is devoted to analysing Foucault's hypothesis on the Christian development of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" that closes the last section of *Confessions of the Flesh*. The third part addresses the contrast between Cassian's and

³ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 5. Foucault defines subjectivity as "the mode of relation of self to self"; Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living. Lectures at the Collège de France 1979-1980* (2014), 225.

⁴ Even if he does not mention the question of desiring man, Alessandro Pandolfi had already pointed out, well before *Confessions of the flesh* was published, the problematic aspects of the interplay between Cassian and Augustine proposed by Foucault. Alessandro Pandolfi, *Tre studi su Foucault* (2000), 354, quoted in Michel-Yves Perrin, "Lectures foucauldienes d'Augustin. Entre histoire et historiographie" in Büttgen Philippe, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo, and Arianna Sforzini (ed.), *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe. Autour des Aveux de la chair*, in press.

Augustine's accounts of both concupiscence and the human condition. The conclusions focus on the problems that the said contrast involves, and suggest new avenues for developing Foucault's investigation of desiring man.

Through a critical analysis of Foucault's account of desiring man based on *Confessions of the Flesh*, I aim to provide both a new insight into one of the main genealogical hypotheses that structures Foucault's *History of Sexuality* – i.e., the Christian historical origin of modern sexuality – and to enrich the ongoing reception of Foucault's *History of Sexuality* vol. 4.⁵ In this endeavour, I also aim to enrich both the research conducted in the wake of Foucault's reflexion on “desiring man”⁶ and the investigation focused on Foucault's research on Christianity.⁷

FROM CONFESSION TO DESIRING MAN

Since the beginning of the investigation devoted to the *History of Sexuality* project, Foucault assigns Christianity a crucial genealogical relevance in the formation of the modern medical account of sexuality. According to the original “periodisation” proposed by *History of Sexuality* vol. 1, “the traditional technology of the flesh” developed in the wake of Counter-Reformation constitutes the focal point of the formation of the techniques upon which the organisation of the modern medical disciplines of sexuality relies. At the heart

⁵ Sandra Boehringer et Laurie Laufer (dir.), *Après Les Aveux de la chair. Généalogie du sujet chez Michel Foucault* (2020); Philippe Büttgen, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo et Arianna Sforzini (dir.), *Foucault, les Pères, sexe. Autour des Aveux de la chair* (in press); Agustín Colombo, “L'expérience des Pères : Les Aveux de la chair de Michel Foucault et la formation de l'expérience de la chair”, *Revue théologique de Louvain* (in press); Agustín Colombo, “Michel Foucault y el hombre de deseo. Las Confesiones de la carne y los límites de la Historia de la sexualidad”, *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* 37:1 (2020), 123-135; Daniele Lorenzini, “The emergence of desire : notes toward a political history of the will”, *Critical Inquiry* 45 (Winter 2019), 448-470; Orazio Irrera, “L'empire de l'involontaire et la volonté de n'être pas gouverné” *Revista de Filosofía Aurora* 31:52 (2019), 224-256.

⁶ Miguel de Beistegui, *The government of desire: a genealogy of the liberal subject* (2018).

⁷ In France, the work of Michel Senellart and Philippe Chevallier has been crucial for the reception of Foucault's investigation on Christianity. Senellart edited Foucault's lectures at Collège de France that were devoted to studying Christianity, such as *Security, Territory, Population* (2009) and *On the Government of the Living* (2014). An important part of his book *Les Arts de gouverner. Du regimen médiéval au concept de gouvernement* (1995) draws upon Foucault's research on governmentality to investigate the account of government developed by the Church Fathers. Senellart has also written many journal articles and book chapters devoted to analysing Foucault's approach to Christianity – e.g., “Paradossi e attualità della soggettivazione cristiana”, E De Conciliis (ed.), *Dopo Foucault. Genealogie del postmoderno* (2007). Philippe Chevallier is the author of *Michel Foucault et le christianisme* (2011) and of many journal articles and book chapters focused on Foucault's research on Christianity – e.g., “Michel Foucault et le ‘soi’ chrétien”, *Astérion* (2013). Elizabeth Clark's pioneer work “Foucault, the Fathers, and the sex” *Journal of the American Academy of religion* (1988) and the research conducted by James Bernauer, Jeremy Carette – e.g., *Michel Foucault and Theology* (2004) – and Mark Jordan – e.g., *Convulsing Bodies* (2014) have played a crucial role in the reception of Foucault's investigation on Christianity in English speaking countries. The work of Santiago Castro Gómez – e.g., *Historia de la gubernamentalidad II. Filosofía, cristianismo y sexualidad en Michel Foucault* (2016), José Luis Villacañas – *Neoliberalismo como teología política. Habermas, Foucault, Dardot, Laval y la historia del capitalismo contemporáneo* (2020) and Cesar Candiotto and Pedro de Souza – *Foucault e o cristianismo* (2012) has been capital for the reception of Foucault's research on Christianity in Latin America and Spain.

of such diagnosis, desire plays a preeminent epistemological role because it constitutes the object of knowledge of those techniques. In Foucault's view, despite the rupture of the Church caused by the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Catholic and Protestant methods of examination of conscience and pastoral direction established "procedures for analysing 'concupiscence' and transforming it into discourse".⁸ Consequently, the investigation of the formation and development of these Christian techniques has always been pivotal for the questions that, since the beginning, organise Foucault's *History of Sexuality* project: how "a certain inclination has led us to direct the question of what we are to sex"? And more precisely, why desire serves as "our master key" "whenever there is a question of knowing who we are"?⁹

In the wake of the research conducted in *Abnormal*¹⁰, *History of Sexuality* vol. 1 investigates the Christian origin of the modern account of sexuality through confession. In fact, in *History of Sexuality* vol.1, confession (*aveu*) works as that which explains the formation of *scientia sexualis*, namely the "procedures to telling the truth of sex which are geared to a form of knowledge-power"¹¹ that characterise the approach to sexuality in western societies. More precisely, confession is conceived as "the general standard (*matrice*) governing the production of the true discourse on sex".¹² The genealogical dimension of confession is clearly illustrated by the five procedures through which confession may "come to be constituted in scientific terms".¹³ The notion of "desiring man", on which the "modifications" of *The Use of Pleasure* pivot, picks up the genealogical perspective proposed in *History of Sexuality* vol.1. However, by drawing upon the notion of "desiring man", Foucault introduces a twofold displacement. First, the analysis of the formation of the principle of desiring man becomes the cornerstone on which *History of Sexuality*'s new periodisation relies. As Foucault explains, the investigation into the genealogy of desiring man led him to reorganise "the whole study around the slow formation, in antiquity, of a hermeneutics of the self".¹⁴ Second, by putting the emphasis on "hermeneutics", the epistemological status of desire as a key dimension of Foucault's investigation gets reinforced and clarified. The genealogy of the "principle of desiring man" aims to investigate the formation of a "hermeneutics of desire" – a term often used by Foucault as a synonym of the "hermeneutics of the self" – which is focused, as already mentioned, on the practices through which individuals were led to bring into play between themselves and themselves "a certain relationship that allows them to discover, in desire, the truth of their being".¹⁵ In other words, the diagnosis of the constitution of desire as an "object of

⁸ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (1978), 153.

⁹ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰ The seventh lesson of *Abnormal* is dedicated to sketching out a "little history" of confession. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal. Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975* (2003), 170.

¹¹ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 58.

¹² Ibid., 63.

¹³ 1. The clinical codification for the inducement to speak; 2. The postulate of the general and diffuse causality; 3. The principal of latency intrinsic to sexuality; 4. The method of interpretation; 5. The medicalisation of the effects of confession (*History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 65-67).

¹⁴ *The Use of Pleasure*, 6.

¹⁵ Ibid., 5.

veridiction" of subjectivity – i.e., an object capable of declaring "true or false"¹⁶ about subjectivity – acquires a clearer priority in Foucault's investigation. This is because, even if *History of Sexuality vol. 1* was already eloquent about the epistemological role of desire – "the master key" that serves to know who we are –, desire remained too attached to the genealogical pre-eminence that the book accords to confession. While confession still plays a pivotal role in Foucault's investigation, with *The Use of Pleasure*, the diagnosis of the historical conditions of the problematisation of desire as an element susceptible of revealing the truth of individuals acquires a thematical autonomy and a clearer independent genealogical relevance. Certainly, such displacement is provoked by the general theoretical perspective on subjectivity that henceforth dominates *History of Sexuality*. In fact, even if the dimension of subjectivity was already present in *History of Sexuality vol. 1* – according to which confession involves "an immense labour to which the West has submitted generations in order to produce (...) men's subjection: their constitutions as subjects in both senses of the word"¹⁷ – the first volume of Foucault's project was mainly devoted to analysing the development of the medical disciplines that characterise the modern account of sexuality. The "modifications" introduced by *The Use of Pleasure* do not change the stated goal of Foucault's investigation. However, the diagnosis of the shaping of the modern medical account of sexuality, which is now defined by Foucault in terms of the "experience of sexuality",¹⁸ henceforth relies on the analysis of the role that desire plays within the historical dynamics that organise the relations between subjectivity and truth.

Written before *The Use of Pleasure*¹⁹ but published in 2018 almost 35 years after Foucault's death, *History of Sexuality vol. 4, Les Aveux de la chair* is devoted to studying the sexual ethics elaborated by the Church Fathers. The last section of the book, "the libidinisation of sex" contains crucial elements that allow a better understanding of Foucault's hypothesis regarding the elaboration of the notion of "desiring man" by Christianity. Actually, Foucault's account of desiring man seems to be inspired by the diagnosis that closes the main part of the book²⁰ on the emergence of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" at the time of St. Augustine and his contemporaries.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, "Foucault" [1994], in *Essential Works 2: Aesthetics, Methods, and Epistemology*, ed. Faubion James (1998), 460.

¹⁷ *History of Sexuality, vol. 1*, 60. *History of Sexuality, vol. 1* does not clarify what "both senses of the word subject" are. For a possible explanation, Michel Foucault, "The subject and power" (1982), 212: "There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and [subject] tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subjects to".

¹⁸ *The Use of Pleasure*, 5.

¹⁹ According to the editor of *Les Aveux de la chair*, Frédéric Gros, Foucault completed the manuscript of *Les Aveux de la chair* between 1981 and 1982 (Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality vol. 4, Confessions of the Flesh* (2021), x). Michel Senellart affirms that Foucault started to work on the manuscript at the beginning of 1979. According to him, "it is likely" that the writing of the manuscript accompanied the development of the lectures at the Collège de France *On the Government of the Living* (Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, "Situation du cours", 343).

²⁰ The book also includes four appendices; *Confessions of the Flesh*, 292-323.

THE ANALYTICS OF THE SUBJECT OF CONCUPISCENCE

According to Foucault, at the time of St. Augustine and his contemporaries ("In Augustine and his time"), Christianity developed an account of concupiscence as "evil" through which it was possible to combine, under the "same theme of spiritual combat (*combat spirituel*)", the exercise of virginity and the practice of marriage. This is because individuals, in both virginity and marriage, have to deal with the same kind of evil. Therefore, both conditions – i.e., virginity and marriage – require the "same renunciation of the concupiscent form of the will (*Dans les deux états c'est au même mal qu'on a affaire, c'est le même renoncement à la forme concupiscente de la volonté qui est exigé*)".²¹ As a consequence, Foucault affirms, the regulation of all sexual conduct relies on the relationship that individuals have with their own concupiscence. Such a relationship is twofold. On the one hand, it concerns individuals' relation with their own truth because such truth "can be discovered only by the subject itself in its innermost being." Foucault does not explain whether, in order to discover their own truth, individuals need to focus on their own desire. However, as his conclusions show, this seems to be Foucault's opinion. On the other hand, the relation that individuals have with their own concupiscence works as the basis that determines which sexual acts are allowed or forbidden. Accordingly, this aspect of individuals' relation with their own concupiscence results in a juridical organisation of sexual activity based on which individuals' actions will be defined and divided in terms of good or wrong.²²

In terms of Foucault's investigation of Christianity, the diagnosis regarding the aforementioned twofold dynamic of the relation that individuals have with their own concupiscence relies on the possibility of connecting two different fields of analysis. On the one hand, there is the truth-telling ascetic techniques developed by Cassian's account of chastity – i.e., techniques that allow the discovery of the truth of the subject built up by the monastic reflection on virginity. On the other hand, there is the juridical dimension of Augustine's ethics of marriage. As Foucault affirms, the connection between these two fields would be grounded on a similar account of concupiscence developed at the time of Augustine and his contemporaries – like Augustine, Cassian was born in the fourth century and died in the fifth century. Based on the interplay between Cassian's truth-telling ascetic techniques and Augustine's ethics of marriage, Foucault affirms that Christianity builds up an "analytic of the subject of concupiscence", which *Confessions of the Flesh* does not define in detail. In fact, the book only mentions that "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" consists in an analysis performed either "in the form of theory and speculation" or "in the practical form of individual examination".²³ Nonetheless, the terms of the concept are clear: the "analytic of the subject of concupiscence" consists in an analysis

²¹ Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 284. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 4, Les Aveux de la chair* (2018), 360.

²² *Confessions of the Flesh*, 284-285. This twofold dimension of the relationship between subjectivity and desire developed by Christianity results in the possibility to conceive the subject as both a desiring subject and a juridical subject simultaneously (*Confessions of the Flesh*, 277).

²³ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 285.

focalised on the subject's desire. The conceptual echoes with the "principle of desiring man" are evident: what is at stake in both notions is the analysis of desire as an element susceptible to bringing to light individuals' truth.

As I will show, the interplay between Cassian and Augustine on which Foucault's diagnosis of the Christian development of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" relies constitutes one of the most problematic aspects of Foucault's investigation into Christianity and, therefore, on his reflections on the principle of desiring man. Prior to focusing on Foucault's analysis of Cassian and Augustine, it is worth considering the genealogical relevance that Foucault assigns to the perspective on desire elaborated by Christianity in late antiquity.

In Foucault's view, the sexual ethics that resulted from the Christian account of concupiscence dislocated the Pagan account of sexual ethics, which constituted a "paroxysmal bloc"; a "convulsional event (*unité*)" where individuals "would lose themselves in the pleasure of their interaction with the other, to the point of mimicking death".²⁴ By undoing this block through "rules of living, arts of conducting oneself and others, techniques of examination or procedures of confession, a general doctrine of desire, of the fall, transgression (*faute*)",²⁵ Christianity reorganised this ethical unity. However, in doing so, the new Christian ethical block no longer pivoted on pleasure and the relationship to others. Rather, it was organised by centring "on desire and the subject."²⁶ This reorganisation of the sexual ethics gave rise to "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence", which, as mentioned, could take either the form of the "theory or speculation" or the mandatory practice of "self-examination". Focused on the sexual ethics developed by the Church Fathers, *History of Sexuality* vol. 4 does not examine the dislocation of Pagan sexual ethics. However, it is possible to grasp Foucault's hypothesis regarding such dislocation better by drawing upon *History of Sexuality* vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure* and Foucault's lecture at the Collège de France *Subjectivity and Truth*.

While Foucault generally defines *aphrodisia*, namely the Pagan account of sexual ethics, as "acts, gestures, and contacts that produce a certain form of pleasure",²⁷ he particularly insists on the idea that what characterises *aphrodisia* is their dynamics instead of their form. In his view, *aphrodisia*'s dynamics are defined by the "movement that linked *aphrodisia* to the pleasure that was associated with them and to the desire to which they gave rise".²⁸ More precisely, "the attraction exerted by pleasure and the force of the desire that was directed toward it constituted, together with the action of the *aphrodisia* itself, a solid unity".²⁹ Even if, from both a conceptual and an analytical point of view, pleasure, desire, and *aphrodisia* could be considered as different elements in the Pagan "experience of *aphrodisia*", they were "closely bound to one another".³⁰ Accordingly, the object of the moral

²⁴ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 285, *Les Aveux de la chair*, 360.

²⁵ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 285.

²⁶ *Les Aveux de la chair*, 361. Passage not included in the English translation.

²⁷ *The Use of Pleasure*, 40.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

reflection of Greeks in matters of sexual conduct was the dynamics, in particular the “force” that joined all pleasure, desire, and the sexual acts (*aphrodisia*) “in a circular fashion”.³¹ Therefore, in such a perspective on sexual activity, desire could be conceived neither as an isolated element nor as a preeminent dimension of sexual ethics. In *Confessions of the Flesh*, the development of the analytic of the subject of concupiscence by Christianity leads to the dislocation of the block of *aphrodisia*, even if it actually seems, according to Foucault’s own research, that such a process was provoked by a displacement that took place within the Pagan account of sexual ethics.

As Foucault argues in the last lecture of the series of lectures at the Collège de France, *Subjectivity and Truth*, Stoics introduced a crucial discontinuity in the sexual ethics of Antiquity. Through such modifications, desire is conceived as an isolated element of man’s ethical conduct and becomes a preeminent dimension of the self which has to be managed and controlled. These modifications engaged a process of “objectivation” through which desire is problematised in terms of “the very root of the sexual activity that has to be constituted within oneself as the object of a control, of a permanent observation”.³² Foucault’s analysis of the principle of symmetrical conjugality developed by Musonius Rufus illustrates well this new account of desire. According to that principle, “only marriage can constitute the naturally legitimate tie for sexual relations”.³³ In Musonius Rufus’ view, Foucault argues, the prohibition to commit adultery does not rely on the juridical equality between man and wife, which could be allowed by Stoic doctrine. Rather, it was grounded on a moral inequality between them. In the conjugal relationship, the husband has to play a pedagogical role: his real role is to be “the wife’s guide, it is for him to show the right way, to show how to live, to give the living example of the way of living”.³⁴ In order to be able to play such a role, the husband must master himself. According to this principle, in the event he commits adultery, the husband would show that “the desire for sexual relations is so intense and violent in him that he cannot control it, that he is not master of himself”.³⁵ Therefore, having control of his own desire is central to the ethical position that the husband has in the couple. Accordingly, desire (*epithumia*) is conceived as the element that “I must check and master, that I must observe and take into account at its source in order to assure myself that I will be able to establish, maintain, and renew throughout my behaviour the caesura necessary to the relation I have to my own sex”.³⁶ Therefore, the technologies of the self developed by Stoics through the reflection on sexual ethics “extract” “the element of desire from *aphrodisia*” and grant it a privileged role.³⁷ By means of this extraction, the block of *aphrodisia* is “dismantled (*disloqué*)” and “the whole problem of *aphrodisia*” is recentred “around desire”.³⁸

³¹ Ibid., 43.

³² Michel Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth* (2017), 284-85.

³³ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality* vol. 3, *The Care of the Self* (1986), 172.

³⁴ Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth*, 264.

³⁵ Ibid.; Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 173.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth*, 286.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 287; Michel Foucault, *Subjectivité et vérité* (2014), 291.

Based on research probably conducted after the manuscript today published as *Confessions of the Flesh* was written,³⁹ these remarks about the Stoics' sexual ethics made by Foucault in *Subjectivity and Truth* allow a more comprehensive perspective on Foucault's hypothesis regarding the consequences of the historical emergence of Christian sexual ethics described in the last pages of today's *History of Sexuality vol. 4*: Christianity itself would not have caused the dismantlement of *aphrodisia*. Rather, Christianity would have contributed to an ongoing process of dismantlement of *aphrodisia* by reorganising the whole architecture of sexual ethics, which henceforth pivots on the analysis of individuals' desire.

As I mentioned previously, Foucault's hypothesis on the development of the Christian sexual ethics based on "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" relies on the interplay between two main domains of Foucault's investigation on Christianity: St. Augustine's account of libido and Cassian's spiritual techniques of examination of thoughts.

The last section of the third part of *History of Sexuality vol. 4*, "The libidinisation of sex," is dedicated to analysing St. Augustine's account of libido. As Foucault explains, in St. Augustine's view, the emergence of libido in the world – i.e., "the involuntary form of the urge (*mouvement*)" that characterises sexual intercourse,⁴⁰ particularly illustrated by the image of the male erection – is a consequence of the Fall provoked by human action. According to Augustine, in Paradise, prior to the Fall, all the elements which took part in the sexual act were under the absolute and complete control of the human will. Human disobedience to God provoked the alteration of human will that characterises libido.⁴¹ As a consequence of eating the forbidden fruit, God punished Adam and Eve by reproducing in them the attitude of disobedience that they have previously had towards him. In doing so, God's punishment was located neither between the body and the soul nor between the matter and the spirit. Rather, it affected the whole subject.⁴² As Foucault explains, the change provoked by the Fall affects "the materiality of the body through the structure of the subject in terms of the relation of the will to itself (*la matérialité du corps à travers la structure du sujet comme volonté de soi sur soi*)"⁴³: the human will is therefore internally split, devised, and turned against itself.

St. Augustine's account of libido therefore engages a deep anthropological reflexion. This is because the emergence of libido modifies the human condition as it was initially

³⁹ As I have shown, Foucault probably gave the lectures *Subjectivity and truth* after writing the typescript of *Les Aveux de la chair*. Agustín Colombo, « L'expérience des Pères: *Les Aveux de la chair* de Michel Foucault et la formation de l'expérience de la chair », *Revue théologique de Louvain* (in press).

⁴⁰ *Confessions of the flesh*, 262, *Les Aveux de la chair*, 333.

⁴¹ As Elizabeth Clark has pointed out, in the course of his debate with Julian of Eclanum, St. Augustine admits the existence of human concupiscence before the Fall. He will also develop a conceptual difference between the *concupiscentia nuptiarum*, which could have existed in Paradise and the *concupiscentia carnis*, which was necessary absent from Paradise. Clark Elizabeth, "L'Augustin de Foucault au risque de l'œuvre augustiniennne" in Büttgen Philippe, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo, and Arianna Sforzini (ed.), *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe*, in press. Cf. *Confessions of the Flesh*, 262, note 18, *Les Aveux de la chair*, 333, note 2.

⁴² As Alain de Libera argues, the use of the term "subject" referred to Augustine implies several problems (Alain de Libera, *L'invention du sujet moderne* (2015), 40-46). De Libera particularly criticises the term "desiring man" (*sujet désirant*), although he does not mention Foucault directly. In order to maintain the coherence, I use the term subject as Foucault utilises it in his analysis of Augustine's account of libido.

⁴³ *Les Aveux de la chair*, 333. Passage not included in the English translation.

conceived by God, even if human action – i.e., human disobedience – was not able to undo God's creation. In fact, as Foucault points out well, in Augustine's view, the modification of the human condition engaged by libido constitutes a "degradation of the being" that humans hold from God and not an alteration of God's creation: "By turning away from God, and by refusing to obey him, man thought he was becoming the master of himself: he believed he was emancipating his being. He is only falling away from a being that only sustains itself through the will of God".⁴⁴

The anthropological shift caused by St. Augustine's account of libido was considerable. As Albercht Dihle argues, St. Augustine introduced an anthropological account of will which displayed a strong contrast with the Roman legal approach to will.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, it is the account of the human condition – and not only the approach to human will – entailed by St. Augustine's account of libido that seems to have provoked a real turning point. As Peter Brown explains, "Augustine's handling of the history of the creation of Adam and Eve, and of their fall, made plain the extent to which he was prepared to shift the center of gravity of Christian thought on the human person".⁴⁶ Unlike contemporary Christian writers like Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa, and Jerome, who would agree in affirming that marriage and creation of the family were a "result of a sad decline, by which Adam and Eve had lapsed from an 'angelic' state into physicality, and so into death",⁴⁷ what remains a dark enigma for the bishop of Hippo "was the distortion of the will of those who now made up society": for him "the twisted human will (...) was what was new in the human condition after Adam's Fall".⁴⁸

As far as Foucault's research on *History of sexuality* is concerned, the discontinuity introduced by St. Augustine's account of libido constitutes a crucial turning point, too. If for the Stoics desire was a privileged element of male individuals on which the sexual activity had to pivot, with St. Augustine desire becomes a specific trait of human nature. Henceforth, desire is not conceived as an isolated element of the individual that has to be controlled. Rather, desire is what characterizes and defines the human condition. The juridical dimension of Augustine's ethics of marriage that, in Foucault's view, constitutes a distinctive feature of the Christian account of desire is a consequence of the perspective on desire elaborated by the bishop of Hippo. Two notions organise such a juridical approach to the sexual ethics of the married couple: *consensus* and *usus*.

On the one hand, *consensus* allows one to assign the responsibility of the sin involved in the sexual act. In Augustine's view, concupiscence remains a constitutive part of the subject even after baptism. Nonetheless, after baptism, concupiscence is not always at work but it is part of individuals as a "quality". As Augustine points it out in *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, after baptism concupiscence does not remain in individuals as a substance, such as a body or a spirit. Rather, concupiscence remains in individuals as a "bad

⁴⁴ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 269.

⁴⁵ Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (1982), 143.

⁴⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (1988), 399.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 404.

disposition" which affects them "as a languor or weakness" (*Non enim substantialiter manet, sicut aliquod corpus, aut spiritus: sed affectio est quaedam malae qualitatis, sicut languor*).⁴⁹ *Consensus* is the free act through which individuals put concupiscence to work. Consequently, through *consensus*, concupiscence ceases to be only a languor. However, *consensus* is not only the transformation of desire into a real act. *Consensus* is, above all, an act through which the human will takes itself as its own object and both accepts and wants to have the fallen form of concupiscence. This attitude of the will towards its own self is a condition of the sinful act because, even if concupiscence remains in the subject as a "quality", it never dominates the soul entirely, and therefore it cannot drive the subject to commit a sin. Consequently, *consensus* constitutes the necessary "supplement" through which "one wills what concupiscence wants".⁵⁰ By affirming the concupiscent form of the will through such supplement, the subject becomes responsible for his or her concupiscent acts. So, *consensus* plays a key role in Augustine's juridical approach to the ethics of marriage because it is an indispensable element for establishing individuals' responsibility of sinful acts. On the other hand, the notion of *usus* opens the way for the individual to utilise his or her concupiscence without committing a forbidden act. Conjugal sexual activity inevitably involves the involuntary movements of concupiscence. Through *usus* it is possible to attain certain objectives which do not imply individuals' consent to concupiscence at the moment the sexual act takes place. These legitimate objectives are procreation and helping a spouse avoid fornication.⁵¹ These two objectives work as the basis that establishes under which circumstances the sexual activity of the couple is forbidden or not. In Foucault's view, the interplay between *consensus* and *usus* developed through Augustine's approach to the sexual ethics of marriage is crucial because it opened the way for a meticulous codification of sexual ethics. In fact, as Foucault argues, the reflections of the bishop of Hippo on concupiscence constitute the "theoretical matrix" of the "endless rules and developed casuistry" of sexual activity of the married couple built up by medieval Christianity.⁵²

John Cassian's truth-telling ascetism completes Foucault's diagnosis of the emergence of the Christian sexual ethics in late antiquity. As described in the last section "virginity and self-knowledge (*virginité et connaissance*)" of the second part "Being virgin (*Être vierge*)" of *Confessions of the Flesh*, Cassian develops such techniques through a reflexion on chastity. However, the general framework for understanding what is at stake in these techniques is Cassian's approach to *exagoreusis* analysed in the last section "The art of arts (*L'art des arts*)" of the first part of *Confessions of the Flesh*, "The formation of a new experience (*La formation d'une expérience nouvelle*)".

Monastic *exagoreusis* consists in an intimate interplay between the examination of thoughts (*cogitationes, logismoi*) and confession. The aim of *exagoreusis* is to obtain the conditions needed to make the flow or the movements of individuals' thoughts as orderly

⁴⁹ Saint Augustine, PL 44, 430.

⁵⁰ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 278

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 283-284.

and pure as possible. This is because the thoughts may be distressing and therefore able to perturb the soul's quest of God's contemplation.⁵³ Accordingly, individuals need to identify the kind of thoughts that come to their mind and separate true thoughts from illusions. This is a crucial task because in Cassian's view, Foucault argues, since the Fall Satan has been able to penetrate the human body, weaken the human soul, and send it "suggestions, images, thoughts, whose origin is hard to determine".⁵⁴ Such a task can only be accomplished if combined to confession to an elder monk, because humans, particularly novice monks, are unable to determine the origin of their thoughts by their own means given that Satan could always mislead them. The simple fact of expressing one's soul's inner secrets to others through words gives confession its own "performative force (*force opératoire*)": confession has the ability to tell, show, expel, and free from sin.⁵⁵ Purity of heart (*puritate* or *puritas cordis*) and spiritual combat are two specific dimensions of Cassian's asceticism of chastity that illustrate in depth the dynamics of truth-telling elaborated by the monk.

Purity of heart constitutes both the condition and the effect sought through chastity in order to attain God's contemplation. As Columba Stewart explains, purity of heart "is the centrepiece of Cassian's monastic theology, the term he uses to describe monastic perfection".⁵⁶ Developed in the wake of Evagrius Ponticus' (345-399) approach to *apatheia* – i.e., passionlessness –, Cassian, like Evagrius, "thought of purity of heart as progressive and consisting of degrees of achievement", even if Cassian "does not define the different degrees of purity of heart as the same way Evagrius did the stages of *apatheia*".⁵⁷ In practical and experimental terms, "purity of heart means freedom from domination by sin and the possession of a deep inner peace".⁵⁸ Foucault's analysis, focused on the relationship between chastity and self-knowledge, emphasises a twofold aspect of purity of heart. On the one hand, purity of heart is the indispensable condition of spiritual science and therefore of the correct comprehension of Scriptures.⁵⁹ As Owen Chadwick points out, in Cassian's view the *spiritualis scientia* "proves to be the deeper understanding of the Scriptures and ceaseless meditation upon them".⁶⁰ Consequently, in Cassian's perspective, "meditation upon scripture is equated with gnosis, and is thus an indispensable background to contemplation".⁶¹ On the other hand, purity of heart constitutes both the condition and the result of the individual's ascetic process of self-knowledge. In order to reach the purity of heart (the result), the soul has to "watch attentively over itself, on the lookout for the impulses produced within it and blotting out everything that might divert it from

⁵³ Ibid., 102.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 99.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 108, *Les Aveux de la chair*, 142. Foucault also remarks that the elder monk plays an important role in the monastic practice of confession, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 100-101.

⁵⁶ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (1998), 41-42.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁵⁹ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 170-171.

⁶⁰ Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (1950), 151.

⁶¹ Ibid., 151.

contemplation".⁶² Such a result can only be attained if, by grounding on the purity of heart (condition), the interior gaze penetrates the "heart's secrets, shining the light there and dispelling its obscurity".⁶³ However, through purity of heart, Cassian elaborates a circular ascetic dynamic of self-knowledge drawn upon self-examination and confession, in which impurity is not completely eliminated. Given that circularity, "the purer one is, the more light one has for knowing oneself better (...) the more one recognises how impure one is, and therefore "the more important it is to shine the light on one's deepest recesses and dispel the darkness of the soul".⁶⁴

As for the spiritual combat, it is what characterises monk's everyday life before achieving the life of contemplation. Such combat is twofold. On the one hand, it constitutes an athletic challenge with oneself through which the monk aims to improve himself constantly based on exercises and training. On the other hand, the spiritual combat entails a permanent "war against an adversary",⁶⁵ namely Satan. As Foucault explains, for Cassian there are eight different forms of combat, each of them against different adversaries: gluttony, fornication, greed, anger, sadness, acedia, vainglory, and pride. Inspired by Evagrius' typology of general "thoughts" (*logismoi*), such a typology illustrates the different combats against the thoughts that threaten the soul in the quest of contemplation.⁶⁶ The last part of the section "Virginity and self-knowledge" focuses on the combat against fornication. This text was published well before *Confessions of the Flesh*, when Foucault was still alive, even if the version of the text included in today's *History of Sexuality* vol. 4 is slightly different to the one published previously.⁶⁷

Foucault's diagnosis of the Christian development of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" both supposes and relies on the interplay between Cassian's truth-telling ascetic techniques and Augustine's account of concupiscence. In Cassian, Foucault finds the dimension of the ascetics techniques through which individuals are able to perform a self-examination, whereas in Augustine he locates an account of desire as that which constitutes the distinguishing feature of the human condition. In the wake of such a diagnosis, Foucault seems to have elaborated the notion of desiring man. In fact, the notion of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" introduced by *Confessions of the Flesh* supposes the interplay of exactly the same elements that define the "principle of desiring man": the need for both expressing and deciphering the subject's inner truth – i.e., the "hermeneutics of the self" – by focusing on the subject's desire. However, *Confessions of the Flesh* does not explain how these two elements interplay.⁶⁸ Hence, the question that needs to be

⁶² *Confessions of the Flesh*, 171.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ See Michel Senellart. "Le combat de la chasteté", notice in Michel Foucault *Œuvres* (2015), 1644-1648.

⁶⁸ The conclusions of the conference "Sexuality and solitude" rely on the same interplay between Cassian's ascetics techniques and Augustine's account of desire, which, however, is not explained (Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and solitude" in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (1997), 182-183).

addressed seems to be as obvious as it is substantial: is such interplay between Cassian's asceticism and Augustine's account of desire possible?

A TWOFOLD CONTRAST BETWEEN AUGUSTINE AND CASSIAN: CONCUPISCENCE AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

In order to better analyse Foucault's hypothesis regarding the Christian development of the analytic of the subject of concupiscence, I will focus on the contrast between Cassian's and Augustine's different approaches to both concupiscence and the human condition.⁶⁹ This twofold contrast exposes some of the problems involved in the crucial diagnosis that closes *Confessions of the Flesh*. In doing so, it will be possible to seize the extent to which Foucault's death prematurely interrupted the research on *History of Sexuality* and, consequently, left capital questions open.

As Foucault notes, Cassian's and Augustine's perspectives on desire are quite close. Nonetheless, they are not exactly the same. In particular, they do not seem to give a univocal account of desire as "evil", as Foucault suggests.

Columba Stewart argues that Cassian uses the word "concupiscence" "for an array of desires".⁷⁰ As Stewart explains, "Cassian's understanding of human desire has two perspectives: that which is *original* nature, that is, as God intended for us to be, and that which has *become* natural as a result of the Fall (*post ruinam*, *Conf.* 4.7.1)".⁷¹ Accordingly, most of Cassian's descriptions of the body and its natural needs "fall somewhere between these two poles".⁷² These twofold perspective on desire explain the apparent dichotomy in Cassian's anthropology. Sometimes Cassian shares the optimism characteristic of much of eastern Christian theology, as reflected in his discussion on grace and free will: humans seek assistance in God to recover both the natural desire for good and the natural knowledge of God's moral ordering of the universe that humans have been given. However, when he focuses on asceticism and the power of the vices, Cassian takes a pessimistic tone: "What has *become* natural is the war between the flesh and the spirit, each with its own lust (*concupiscentia*) utterly opposed to that of the other".⁷³ Conference 4 "On concupiscence" illustrates well the twofold aspect of Cassian's approach to concupiscence. According to this Conference, humans are affected by two kinds of concupiscence, namely the concupiscence of the flesh and the concupiscence of the spirit. The interplay between these two forms of concupiscence results in "an interior battle" "daily waged within us (*Quae cum utraque, id est desideria carnis et spiritus in uno eodemque sint homine, intestinum cotidie intra nos geritur bellum*)".⁷⁴ This is for the concupiscence of the flesh "swiftly

⁶⁹ In a recently published book inspired by Foucault's work, Niki Kasumi Clements analyses in depth the contrasts between Cassian and Augustine. Niki Kasumi Clements, *Sites of the Ascetic Self* (2020), chapter 3 "Cassian on human effort", 65-88.

⁷⁰ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 64.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 65. Italics according to the original text.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ John Cassian, *The Conferences* (1997), 161; Jean Cassien, *Conférences* (1955), IV, 11, p. 175.

descends into vice, rejoices in those delights which pertain to present repose", whereas the concupiscence of the spirit "yearns to be entirely absorbed in spiritual pursuits [to such an extent] that it is even willing to exclude the necessities of the flesh, and so much does it long to be constantly taken up with these pursuits that it does not want to pay any attention at all to the frailty of the flesh".⁷⁵ Therefore, unlike Augustine, Cassian does not conceive human desire as an internal dislocation of the will which expresses the fallen condition of man. Actually, in Cassian's view the human condition is not characterised by a univocal form of desire which explains the disobedient movements of the will. Rather, for Cassian, humans are constantly affected by an inner and complex battle between the desires of the flesh and those of the spirit. The opposition of these two kinds of desire is what actually explains why humans may not do what they want to do (*ut non quaecumque uultis illa faciatis*).⁷⁶ Such opposition functions as the most diligent school master (*paedagogus*) "to remind the monk that only by grace can the gift of purity be attained".⁷⁷

These remarks on the contrast between Cassian's and Augustine's accounts of concupiscence lead us to the second point of the opposition that I would like to consider, namely the different conceptions that they have of the human condition.

Peter Brown, echoing the previous remarks on Cassian's account of desire, argues that Cassian's writings could be conceived as "the most discreet and authoritative rebuttal" of Augustine's view on concupiscence.⁷⁸ Brown notes that, for Cassian, sexuality and sexual desire do not speak "of one single, decisive event within the soul" which echoes "in the body the unalterable consequence of mankind's first sin".⁷⁹ As a loyal follower of the Desert Fathers and a distant heir of the thought of Origen (185-254) (a tradition of thought that Augustine never absorbed),⁸⁰ Cassian "was convinced that the very depths of the person could shift".⁸¹ Even if they are not fully available to the individual's consciousness, the forces within him or her "lay within the power of free will to master, in vigilant collaboration with the grace of God".⁸² Consequently, "the inner world of the monk could be transformed, slowly but surely".⁸³ In short, unlike Augustine, Cassian does not consider that "the human will has descended wholly upon the side of the flesh".⁸⁴

This contrast between Cassian's and Augustine's approach to human free will and grace animated one of the most fascinating controversies in the history of Christianity. In the fifth century, Cassian's perspective on free will was the target of the critiques of Prosper of Aquitaine. In his *Contra Collatorem* published in 432, two years after Augustine's death, Prosper accuses Cassian of teaching that "in Adam the human race did not fall; that

⁷⁵ Cassian, *The Conferences*, 161.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*; Jean Cassien, *Conf. IV*, 11, p. 175.

⁷⁷ *Cassian the Monk*, 77.

⁷⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 420.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 422.

⁸⁰ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (1967), 398.

⁸¹ *The Body and Society*, 422.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 123.

the will of man is healthy; that grace is given according to merit".⁸⁵ Cassian was, therefore, seen as a defender of the doctrine of Pelagius⁸⁶, which was refuted by Augustine.⁸⁷ Hence, to Prosper, who was an admirer of Augustine, Cassian represented a dangerous opposing view to Augustine's conception of grace, in particular because the monks from Lérins and Marseille, two places where Cassian's influence was considerable,⁸⁸ "were already becoming bishops", and, therefore, in Prosper's view, "the quality of Christianity in Gaul was at stake".⁸⁹ However, Cassian's conception of free will and human grace did not aim to refute Augustine. As Chadwick points out, "in Cassian, grace possesses its full Augustinian meaning" because it "is an interior working of God within the soul" without which the ascetic practices and spiritual progress are impossible.⁹⁰ However, for the monk there is no room for predestination, because "God's mercy and grace are bestowed only upon those who labour and exert themselves".⁹¹ In short, in Cassian's view, the human activity, particularly illustrated by ascetism and prayer, is necessary but does not suffice to achieve the life of contemplation and salvation which could only be granted by divine grace.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the contrast between Cassian's and Augustine's accounts of both concupiscence and the human condition brings to light a problematic aspect of Foucault's hypothesis about the Christian development of the analytic of the subject of concupiscence. As the second section of the article shows, such a hypothesis relies on the idea that Cassian and Augustine share the same perspective on concupiscence. It follows that "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" conceptualises the interplay between Cassian's ascetic truth-telling techniques and Augustine's account of libido. However, as we saw in the previous section, the monk and the bishop of Hippo not only have a different perspective on desire; they also differ in how they conceive the human condition. Furthermore, these do not seem to be the only differences between Cassian and Augustine, as far as the diagnostic about the formation of "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" is concerned. As Foucault's research shows, Cassian's techniques of self-examination are not focused

⁸⁵ Ibid., 135.

⁸⁶ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 365-367; 372-375.

⁸⁷ During the Pelagian controversy, Augustine developed his theory of grace and predestination (Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, "Predestination", 398-407). Owen Chadwick summarises Augustine's account of grace in these terms: "Augustine's doctrine is well known and may be briefly summarised: original sin, transmitted concupiscence resulting from the Fall, has changed the human race into a 'lump of damnation'. If the justice of God means anything, this sinfulness demands and should receive the severest punishment; all humanity ought, rightly, to be consigned to hell for eternity. But his divine mercy is such that from the lump he selects souls – not a few, but in large numbers though not so large as the damned – whom, without taking into account their future merits, he predestines to salvation" (Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 110).

⁸⁸ *Cassian the Monk*, 16-18.

⁸⁹ *Augustine of Hippo*, 401.

⁹⁰ *John Cassian*, 122.

⁹¹ John Cassian, *De Institutis Coenobiorum* XII.14, translated by Gibson cited in Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian*, 122.

on desire but on thoughts (*cogitationes/logismoi*).⁹² In other words, the object of the analysis of Cassian's ascetics techniques is not exactly desire.

The differences between Cassian's and Augustine's accounts of desire show to what extent Foucault's research was interrupted by his early death. If "the analytic of the subject of concupiscence" constitutes an embryonic definition of the "principle of desiring man", what is at stake is therefore the possibility of conceiving Christianity as the historical focal point of the formation of the modern account of sexuality. Consequently, the genealogical hypothesis that organises *History of Sexuality* is suddenly re-opened: if Christianity, or at least late antiquity Christianity, did not elaborate the obligation of seeking the truth of the subject in the subject's desire, when did desire become the object of the subject's veridiction? Did Christianity elaborate such an epistemological perspective on desire? Or was it built up by the modern medical account of sexuality? The answer to that question particularly concerns the development of psychoanalysis given that, since the first volume of his project, Foucault affirms that the history of the *dispositif* of sexuality "can serve as an archaeology of psychoanalysis";⁹³ but the heuristic value of *Confessions of the Flesh* vis-à-vis the reflection on the "principle of the desire man" is not limited to shedding a new light only on the questions that guide the diagnosis about the constitution of desire as the object of subject's veridiction.

Foucault's research into Augustine's account of desire included in *Confessions of the Flesh* provides new avenues to investigate; what could be defined, within Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, as the constitution of desire as "the instance of individuals' identity", namely the development of a perspective through which desire is conceived as a pre-eminent dimension of individuals being able to determine what individuals are. The anthropological reflection involved in Augustine's account of libido seems to engage a significant moment in the development of a perspective that assigns such a role to desire. As Foucault shows, in Augustine's view, libido is what characterises humans' fallen condition. Therefore, desire is, according to Augustine's reflection on the human condition, the distinguishing sign of individuals: the libido is both the consequence and that which expresses the fact that the human condition consists in a "degradation of the being" that humans hold from God.⁹⁴ As I have observed, scholars of late antiquity Christianity, like Peter Brown, also highlight the novelty of the anthropological reflection entailed by Augustine's approach to libido. Within Foucault's research, the discontinuity introduced by Augustine becomes particularly clear through the contrast with Foucault's investigation of the Stoics conducted in *Subjectivity and Truth*: it seems that, since Augustine, desire is not an element of individuals that needs to be controlled. Rather, desire is what defines individuals as such. If this diagnosis is correct, Augustine's account of desire becomes crucial to problematising the shaping of the modern medical account of sexuality. If within the latter, desire is conceived as the "master key" that defines who we are, this is

⁹² For a specific analysis about *logismoi* see: García Colombás, *El monacato primitivo* (2004), 625-629; William Harmless, *Desert Christians* (2004), 229.

⁹³ *History of Sexuality* vol. 1, 130.

⁹⁴ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 269.

because desire is able to reveal individuals' identity. In doing so, desire seems to constitute a major machinery of the *dispositif* of sexuality's way of working because desire anchors individuals to their own identity, namely to what they already are, therefore avoiding the liberation promised by the *dispositif* of sexuality itself. Hence, Augustine becomes crucial to a better understanding of the "irony"⁹⁵ of the *dispositif* of sexuality, which tries to make us believe that it is able to liberate us through the analysis of our sex.⁹⁶

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⁹⁵ *History of Sexuality* vol. 1, 159.

⁹⁶ The fact of addressing such a line of analysis – i.e., the possible role of Augustine in the development of an account of desire as an "instance of individuals' identity" – would obviously have to face key arguments related to the history of philosophy; for instance the anachronism of applying terms such as "individual" and "identity" to Augustine's thought. On this point, see Alain de Libera's *L'invention du sujet moderne*, 40-41 and *Archéologie du sujet II. La quête de l'identité* (2008).

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